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A Christian Perspective on Stem Cell Research

By Katherine Steingass

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.

Martin Niemoeller, a German Protestant pastor, made this statement about the failure of the German people to speak out against the Nazis in response to a student's question "But how could it happen?" (Martin Niemoeller, 2001). Many people in Nazi Germany didn't protest because they were not part of the groups being persecuted, but in the end, no one was left untouched. Another group is under attack in America today – thousands of embryos, frozen, waiting for scientists to decide their fate. Will we speak out and protest against this attack?

President Bush's decision in August, 2001 concerning stem cell research was headline news. This topic has been overshadowed in recent months by the events ensuing from the September 11 attack, but the debate still continues. To understand this debate, one must look at the scientific, legal, and ethical aspects.

Human embryonic stem (HES) cells are believed to have the potential to treat conditions such as heart disease, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's. To create HES cell lines, researchers remove cells from the inner cell mass of a blastocyst-stage pre-implantation embryo. These cells are totipotent; i.e., they have the potential to develop into any type of body cell. Scientists suggest that these cell lines, once cultured, will proliferate indefinitely. Possible uses of these cells include drug screening and replacement of cells damaged by disease. (Jones, 2000)

In the early 1980's, the Reagan administration banned federal support for any embryo research (Kahn, 1999). In January 1999, the Department of Health and Human Services decided that it would not be improper for the government to fund HES cell research because the stem cells themselves are not embryos (On Human Embryos, N.D.). This assumes that research using stem cells from destroyed embryos can be divorced from the actual destruction. However, the original congressional ban was intended to exclude not only the actual destruction from funding, but also any research dependent upon such destruction (On Human Embryos, N.D.). The National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) stated in its May 1999 Draft Report on Stem Cell Research, "As long as embryos are destroyed as part of the research enterprise, researchers using embryonic stem cells (and those who fund them) will be complicit in the death of embryos" (quoted in On Human Embryos, N.D.).

Bush announced in August that limited federal funding would support research on existing stem cell lines – lines for which the derivation process had already been initiated at that time. Other guidelines include (1) the embryos must have been created for reproductive purposes, (2) the embryos were no longer needed for those purposes (i.e. were going to be disposed of by fertility clinics), (3) informed consent for donation was obtained, and (4) no payment was provided for

donation (NIH, 2001). The NIH currently has a register of 72 cell lines derived from 64 embryos that are eligible for federal funding (NIH Releases, 2001).

In Bush's presidential campaign, he stated, "Taxpayer funds should not underwrite research that involves the destruction of live human embryos" (Bevington, 2001). Under current legislation, this is not being done directly, but is it occurring indirectly? As researchers proceed, they are no doubt going to call for additional cell lines requiring further embryo destruction. If HES cells can be transplanted, steps will have to be taken to prevent rejection. Proposed solutions to this problem include creating embryos using egg and sperm from related individuals or by cloning one of the patient's own cells (Kahn, 1999). This means creation of embryos for the sole purpose of medical treatment.

Human embryos are not just clusters of cells; they are tiny human beings. Some would claim that because these embryos have not been implanted, so they are only "pre-embryos" and are not truly human. Both the NBAC and the Human Embryo Research Panel reject the term "pre-embryo" as scientifically valid, saying that the human embryo is a living organism from its earliest stages (On Human Embryos, N.D.). From a conception view of personhood, destroying these embryos for their cells is murder. The problem is that many people do not consider these embryos truly persons.

Others may concede at least some degree of personhood to the embryos but feel justified in using their cells to benefit others since they are "going to die anyway." However, most people would consider it unethical to take the organs of death-row inmates to benefit others, "since they're just going to die anyway." What's the difference? The only difference is the physical size of the person. Americans considered both the treatment of vulnerable African-Americans in the Tuskegee study and experimentation on individuals with mental retardation outrageous. What's the difference here? Again, the only difference is the age of the person. Embryos are the most vulnerable of all human beings. How can we condemn the experimental studies of the past while condoning and providing government funding for research that is killing innocent people? (On Human Embryos, N.D.)

Supporters of HES cell research focus on the potential benefit treatment could bring to suffering patients. They believe this would be a proper usage for the thousands of frozen embryos that are "going to be discarded anyway." Joan Samuelson, president and founder of the Parkinson's Action Network states, "Today embryos are being discarded that could be saving me and a million other people with Parkinson's" (Research Foes, 2001).

However, these embryos still have the potential of developing if given the chance to implant. The Snowflake Embryo Adoption Program is attempting to do just that. The program allows couples to adopt a frozen embryo whom the genetic parents do not wish to raise themselves (Snowflakes, N.D.). John and Lucinda Borden were present at a House Government Reform subcommittee hearing concerning embryo research with their two small sons – former frozen embryos. Lucinda told the committee, "Mark and Luke are living rebuttals to the claims that embryos are not people. We plead with you not to fund their slaughter." Her husband then held the two boys up before the legislators and asked, "Which one of my children would you kill?" (Research Foes, 2001).

At the same subcommittee hearing, Rep. Mark Sauder, an Indiana Republican who opposes stem cell research said, "Before the U. S. government condones with federal funding research that results in the destruction of living human embryos, we have the moral obligation to explore and exhaust every ethical alternative" (Research Foes, 2001). In all the hype of HES cell research, not much is said about alternative treatments. Hemopoietic stem cells from bone marrow and placental or umbilical cord blood hold promise in disease treatment. Bone marrow cells have even been shown to regenerate muscle tissue when given the proper environment. Other possible sources of stem cells include fetal bone marrow from stillborn or spontaneously aborted fetuses, living human nerve tissue, and adult cadavers.

Furthermore, injection of the gene controlling production of growth factors directly into a patient's cells can promote angiogenesis without stem cell involvement (On Human Embryos, N.D.) Another possibility is to produce an HES cell line without producing an embryo by reprogramming adult nuclei (Jones, 2000). By focusing efforts on the highly debated area of embryonic stem cells, researchers may be hindering progress on other more promising, ethically unproblematic treatments.

Even if HES stem cells did prove to be more effective in treatment, their use for such treatment would not be justified. Embryos are people, and as seen with Mark and Luke Borden, they are not necessarily just going to be discarded: "If anything is to be gained from the cruel atrocities committed against human beings in the last century and a half, it is the lesson that the utilitarian devaluation of one group of human beings for the alleged benefit of others is a price we simply cannot afford to pay" (On Human Embryos, N.D.).

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